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Achieving Sustainable Upper-scale Gastronomy using Hyper-local Concept

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Abstract

This research was focused at Dubrovnik's potential for sustainable gastronomy tourism, with an emphasis on using organic and locally sourced foods in high-end restaurants. The study topic investigated how managers and owners of restaurants in Dubrovnik's upscale dining industry see and apply sustainable practices. The owners and managers of upscale restaurants in Dubrovnik were interviewed in-person for the study. Based on price range and internet reviews, eight restaurant managers and owners were chosen to participate. The study discovered that although visitors are becoming more conscious of sustainable cuisine, there are still obstacles in the way of completely incorporating sustainable practices—like hyper-local sourcing—into the operations of upscale restaurants in Dubrovnik. Beyond the positive effects on the environment, sustainable cuisine and hyper-local operations would have positive effects on the local economy, dining experiences and development of rural areas therefore taking the pressure of the city of Dubrovnik.

Keywords: Dubrovnik, luxury gastronomy, high-end restaurants, sustainability, hyper-local

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Circular economy and sustainability

Customers in the hospitality industry today are more environmentally concerned than ever, and there is an ever-growing need for eco-friendly goods and services which has forced a lot of hospitality businesses to embrace the concepts of the Circular Economy (CE) and Green Practices (GP) (Machado et al., 2019). The idea of the concept of CE is to reuse the product in the production stage after the product has served its purpose and not to let it finish as a disposal in landfills. There are three levels of CE: micro, meso, and macrolevel. The first level addresses the needs of a single company that must implement specific procedures to integrate CE principles into its operational, strategic management, and production levels. Second, the meso-level denotes collaboration between businesses to make it easier for waste products to be exchanged as raw resources. At the third level, a country, a city, and a region accept the fundamentals of CE (Corona et al., 2019). Another key point of CE literature is the comparability of the concept of CE with sustainability. According to the research, the concept of sustainability has been introduced before the concept of CE. In the '80s the famous Brundtland's report described sustainability as "the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This idea has mostly concentrated on protecting the environment and attaining social justice by taking future generations' demands into consideration.

1.2 Sustainable Gastronomy Tourism

Gastronomy is a set of standards that characterize the art of exquisite cuisine and dining (Batat 2019). Luxury gastronomy refers to luxurious, authentic, and creative culinary arts which connect food production and consumption to personal, cultural, historical, and heritage factors. The variety of its menu, the interior décor, and a immaculate chefs are three things that distinguish luxury gastronomy from normal gastronomy. According to Batat (2019), one of the luxury industry's fastest growing and most dynamic segments right now is gourmet luxury restaurants. (Batat and De Kerviler, 2019). The fact that it is the most changing and growing industry leaves a lot of place for improvement and potential implementation of sustainability in its respective industry. However, to reduce food loss and waste, regulatory bodies and their legislators should push hospitality professionals to make investments in eco-friendly technologies. In exchange for their excess food donations, local authorities can provide them with monetary incentives like tax breaks or exemptions. Through a variety of media platforms, including conventional and digital ones, they ought to encourage sustainable production and consumption practices (Camilleri, M. A., 2018c). Discounts are available for mobile users to buy excess food from cafes, restaurants, and hotels. In addition, by decreasing waste, the app helps these catering businesses reduce their environmental impact and make money from perishable food. Thus, sustainable gastronomy tourism and hyper-local functioning supports producing local and healthy food, makes a restaurant more appealing and promotes rural development. (Bucak & Ateş et al. 2014).

Several intergovernmental organizations have recently begun developing policies on sustainable consumption and production so that businesses and industry could transition from linear economy—which is based on taking the raw resources than making them into products and finally disposing them at the end-of-life time cycle of a product”—to sustainable circular economy. (Camilleri, 2018, OECD 2019,). Green practices are starting to catch on in restaurants, much like

they do in hotels. Green restaurants encourage waste management, water and energy conservation, composting, and recycling. Owners of restaurants are thinking of putting fewer items on their menus. They advertise their daily menu or use the same ingredients in many recipes. Additionally, they serve locally farmed or organic food on their menu. Local food, authentic food, rare to find in the local area and very nutritious food when prepared on traditional ways by using traditional processes and methods, and of course doing everything above environmentally friendly, appears as a main reason people travel to find sustainable gastronomy tourism (Özkaya et al., 2013). According to the authors of a representative American travel blog Joey and Joey, “83% of people think that food helps shape their trip and leaves a lasting impression” (Joey & Joey, 2023). Although the percentage above is huge, few researchers have examined the behavior towards the food and “green” practices in the restaurant industry (Jacobs and Klosse, 2016). Furthermore, a relatively small number of studies have been done to see if the terms sustainability and luxury gastronomy are even possible to interconnect (Hartmann et al., 2016). On one hand, sustainability is simple, modest, and moderate while, on the other hand, the foundation of luxury is exploiting scarce and special resources in excess. Another researcher, Batat (2019) believes sustainability and luxury go hand in hand because they are classic, long-lasting, and require a great deal of skill to create. For example, people frequently trade, sell, or donate expensive goods to others rather than destroying them. Additionally, customers are gaining more knowledge for environmental problems and the well-being of animals which are used in various processes of creation of food (Thøgersen, 2011; Klöckner, 2013). As Batat stated “luxury gastronomy does not only focus on functional aspects of the experience such as the quality of food, but it also reflects experiential and hedonistic values that can enhance the emotions of the customers and increase their feeling of fun, pleasure and joy” (Batat, 2019). This research also indicates that profit plays a crucial role in pushing the

implementation of sustainable luxury practices in gastronomy. The easiest way to describe sustainability is through the three words which create the so called “triple bottom line”. Those three important words are planet, people and profit. Sustainable gastronomy tourism consists of two main factors: the first one being the integration of local products which are coming from local agriculture and the second factor being the ecological impact that business and the industry itself leaves after (Campbell et al., 2015). Sustainable gastronomy tourism also makes it possible to boost local culture, provide additional job possibilities, and earn more money. The existence of the destination will also lengthen with wise resource management. All the factors above have proven that the culinary features could be fantastic potential for destinations (Quan & Wang, 2004). Gastronomic tourism as such really can be an escape from overused adjectives that describe certain destinations such as sea, sand and sun.

Dubrovnik, also known as the „Pearl of Adriatic”, is a town situated in Dalmatia which is southern part of Croatia. Its beautiful location, scenery and gastronomy are just some of the reasons why Dubrovnik got its nickname. People from Dalmatia love to eat and drink so the number of restaurants and their offers is diverse. The central point of restaurant business in the city of Dubrovnik is the Old Town itself. Dubrovnik’s cuisine is based on fresh meat and fish with a lot of olive oil and as little spices as possible. This research aims to investigate the supply and implementation of local and autochthonous products in the menus of upper scale and luxury restaurants in the Old Town and thus confirm or deny the hypothesis which states that: “Dubrovnik at the moment is not a destination that offers sustainable gastronomy tourism”. Three members of the University of Dubrovnik said that as an alternative way to the traditional food delivery system, food hubs are innovations in local food systems (Krželj-Čolović et al., 2023). Hubs improve local populations' access to food by serving as a link between small farmers and marketplaces.

Establishing a hub involves establishing a place where members of the local community, farmers, and other supply chain participants can gather and work together to develop high-quality products or supply methods (Krželj-Čolović et al., 2023).

Dubrovnik, as a destination, is currently seen by many as somewhat “stuck between sea, sand, and sun” and one of the ways to start a positive change can be through the implementation of sustainable luxury gastronomy tourism. More precisely through an established and recognized phenomenon, named “hyper-local”, which involves a lot more than just purchasing local food. The restaurant industry should use fresh and uncontaminated local products which correlatedly should be given at a reasonable price. Ordering organic products that fulfill the necessary quality standards, such as those from certified farms, is in their best interests. Sensitive products, like fruits and vegetables, typically have a shorter shelf life than packaged goods. As a result, restaurants should make flexible agreements with local distributors and suppliers so that they can modify their order quantities in accordance with the anticipated number of customers (Camilleri, 2017). That includes, for example, raising chickens for eggs or keeping livestock instead of ordering pieces of meat, keeping bees for honey, flowers that are used as decorations and waste that is used as a fertilizer. Popular hyper-local restaurants usually have some green areas either near or far from the physical location of the restaurant. Those include gardens on the top of the buildings or larger fields in the rural areas of the towns. The number of restaurants which own or work closely with the farmers has grown considerably over the last couple of years. This research also attempts to identify the benefits, rewards, and challenges of those operations. “Hyper-local” differs from the term “local”. In 2008, U.S Congress declared the term local as (I) the locality or region in which the final product is marketed, so that the total distance that the product is transported is less than 400 miles from the origin of the product”; or “(II) the State in which the product is produced.”

(U.S. Congress, 2008). Seasonality, as mentioned in the text previously, can also have a significant impact on the menu of hyper local, or even local, restaurants (Higuera, n.d.). To maintain the quality of food and deal with the problem of seasonality the restauranters should adjust the menu to the season.

By examining how restaurateurs in the upscale dining sector define and apply sustainability to their operations from the plate to the environment, this study seeks to fill the hole in the literature with the ultimate goal of improving the hedonistic and motional aspects that are fundamental to the luxury food experience. The research also examines if there are any benefits or downsides of restaurant owners and managers that wish to make sure they are serving their valued customers quality meals by sourcing fresh products from nearby farmers, bakers, butchers, and other businesses. Similarly, this research indicates that cautious inventory management systems and just-in-time purchasing can help hospitality organizations build stronger ties with their suppliers, who include farmers and other retailers. Because of these ethical investments, tourism communities will eventually have a sustainable value chain since methods for waste disposal and circular economy laws will benefit the hospitality sector, the planet, and society at large. (Camilleri, 2017c).

2. METHOD

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this research was to find out how many restaurants use local and organic ingredients and if they currently apply or implement in their business some sustainable practices. The method selected to collect the data was semi-structured interviews, because it provides an excellent opportunity to gather complex data through open-ended questions.

2.2 Participants

Participants in this research were owners or the managers of the upper scale restaurants in the center of Dubrovnik and they were chosen based on the online ratings and price range of ten best restaurants in the Dubrovnik. All the eight participants were reached through personal connections and private information. Participants were notified about the requirements and the rules of the interview via mobile phone call. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured from the side of the interviewer. Seven out of eight (eighty-seven-point five percent) participants were males, and one out of eight (twelve-point five percent) participants was female. The age range varied from thirty-one to forty-five while the average age was forty. Hundred percent of participants were native, from Croatia.

2.3 Instrument

Questions used in the interviews were adapted from the questionnaire used by Associate Professor of Marketing Mr. Wided Batat, in his work “Pillars of sustainable food experiences in the luxury gastronomy sector: A qualitative exploration of Michelin-starred chefs’ motivations” (2020). The questions were modified and adjusted to our chosen participants. The instruments consisted of 12 open-ended questions that were originally written in English but since all participants were Croatian, the questions were translated in Croatian, and all the interviews were conducted in Croatian.

2.4 Procedures

As previously stated, the interview was conducted in person and within the facilities of each restaurant respectively. Before the actual meeting and doing the research, all participants agreed to the audio recording request, and they were granted anonymity and confidentiality. Each interview had its own flow and duration, and even though the order of questions that were asked

was not the same all questions had to be answered. The shortest interview lasted nineteen minutes while the longest interview lasted one hour and ten minutes, while the average time duration of interviews was forty minutes. After the interview was completed, audio recordings would be saved on the mobile phone under the name of the restaurant that was monitored. Later that day the interviewer would listen to the audio recordings and would highlight keywords, trends, popular and unpopular opinions, perceptions and even percentages. Finally, the interviewer would compare the results to the previously set hypothesis which stated that “Dubrovnik at the moment is not a destination that offers sustainable gastronomy tourism”.

3. RESULTS

At the beginning of all interviews participants had to introduce themselves, which set the tone of the interview. Twenty-five percent of participants were owners of the restaurants, and the rest were managers of the restaurants. There was one thing in common with all of them. And that one thing was food. From ordering, to delivering, checking, tasting... The passion was there and that could be seen in the conversation that lasted a lot longer than previously planned. Almost every interview body passed the estimated time limit of 40 minutes.

In the first question the respondents had to identify the type of cuisine that was prevalent on their menus, and the majority of participants identified Mediterranean cuisine with a modern Croatian twist as a prevalent type of cuisine. But an interesting and unexpected answer came with the next question where participants were asked if they considered their cuisine to be unique, and, if their answer was positive, they were encouraged to explain that further. Only one participant out of eight answered that their cuisine and their offer was not unique since there were many other restaurants representing Mediterranean cuisine in Dubrovnik.

When it comes to defining the concept of luxury gastronomy, participants had different views on it. One of the participants compared luxury gastronomy to a football match, where everything is pre-planned, and the execution of that plan must be flawless. The participant also added that:

"For quality gastronomy, you must have highly educated people, inventory, quality kitchen, and ingredients".

Another participant beautifully stated: "Luxury gastronomy is not about expansiveness but simplicity, i.e., taking a few ingredients from our environment and turning it into luxury with an abnormally large investment of hours in preparation and tasting with the integration of the past through dishes".

One participant gave an interesting answer to the same question, where he said that all other aspects of life need to be brought to a higher level of functioning to revitalize luxury gastronomy. Other answers, to the same question, included: ingredients that are difficult to obtain, ingredients that are high-priced on the market, ingredients that are not available everywhere, quality service, memorable ambiance and unique presentation of the dish itself.

Next two questions were highly correlated with each other: they aimed to explore the impact of luxury gastronomy on local economy to understand better to which extent luxury gastronomy can be sustainable. The answers from the participants revealed certain trends and perceptions of the participants on these concepts. The first participant stated that gastronomy had a major impact on the local economy and society. This impact can be seen through various taxes, rents, employment of local people etc. Another participant claimed that the city of Dubrovnik could benefit and completely live from sustainable luxury gastronomy, making its economy flourish. "It is not for nothing that he (Dubrovnik) was a republic" as the participant was referring to the sources of

drinking water, rich agricultural fields, proximity to the sea ... Others continued that the impact of gastronomy on the city of Dubrovnik is enormous. The main reason, according to participants, is the complete turning of local population towards tourism and gastronomy as it is one of the main sources of income for the city of Dubrovnik. Only one participant said that individual restaurants are powerless or insignificant in influencing the local community, but rather the city should create the community which would have a huge impact. Furthermore, when the participants were asked to implement term “sustainability” into luxury gastronomy answers like this followed:

"If the trash is difficult, then it's not a good restaurant"

Meaning that luxury gastronomy can be sustainable through limiting the number of guests, accurate demand predictions, and maximizing the use of ingredients. Similar comment was given by the next participant:

"Utilize 5/4 of products"

which means turning all possible leftovers into edible paper, for example. Through local ingredients, the restaurant communicates not only local self-sustainability and local producers to guests but also communicates what grows seasonally and sets the tone for a taste.

But in order to function this way couple of factors were missing and the rest of the participants mentioned a few. One of the participants, manager of the restaurant, told that luxury gastronomy can be sustainable if young people are involved in the production of local products where they are willing to sacrifice their time and effort in exchange for quality local product and not focus on short-term and quick profit. The given example was Tuscany, Italy where everyone in the family, from grandfather to grand grandsons, is included in the production process. Another missing piece for sustainable functioning of luxury gastronomy was mentioned by another participant. The

participant, which happens to be a owner of the restaurant, said that luxury gastronomy can be sustainable if you are doing the job with passion and if you have clear vision of where you want to be in the future. This is what the participant had to say on general gastronomy in Dubrovnik:

"We don't look ahead, we don't have a goal, we don't have a plan, we don't have an idea" - as a city. Unfortunately, it's money first, then love towards food".

Next participant had similar view on the gastronomy of Dubrovnik when he said:

"Today's restaurateurs don't suffer from great gastronomy, but they have become mathematicians"

which means that most restaurant owners only care about serving x lunches and y dinners and financially securing themselves. Owners don't need a person with culinary and hospitality knowledge but a machine that can fulfill their desires. Another similar comment was given by another participant:

"They create it, it happens to us"

- comparison of tourism and gastronomy between Istria and Dubrovnik.

Of course, an indispensable factor when talking about gastronomy and sustainability is the guest itself. So, one of the questions had to be dedicated to them. The question posed to the participants was: "Do you think that your guests are aware of the concept of sustainability in gastronomy and are they willing to pay more for it?". Very strong trends began to occur. Very first participant set the tone and direction, which majority of participants followed, by saying that restaurant guests are aware of the concept of sustainability because they come from destinations whose gastronomic scene is of higher quality and more expensive than Croatian scene, and they are accustomed to dining at fine dining restaurants and therefore paying. Participants also mentioned that guests are

aware of sustainability due to oral presentation by waiters when serving the dish itself. By providing statistical evidence, others have mentioned that the vast majority of guests are aware of the concept of sustainability and are also willing to pay because the restaurant has a high rate of guest return. Out of an average stay of 4 nights, in 70% of cases, guests would eat at the restaurant at least 2 times. Last participant gave reality check by saying:

“Guests are willing to pay, but not overpay”.

Next question was key to understand why or why restaurants don't cooperate with local producers of food. With the questions being stated as: “What would be the biggest advantages and disadvantages of implementation of local products in your cuisine?”, participants simply told couple of pluses and couple of minuses. After all interviews have been done, the main advantages were quality, availability, freshness, taste and guest satisfaction. Furthermore, two participants stated emotional connection to fellow citizens and having their own garden or field as major advantages which can be connected with the “hyper-local” part of literature review. Seasonality, which confirms the authenticity of the product, was stated as both an advantage and disadvantage. Found their place among other disadvantages consistency (suppliers cannot have quality for a long period of time), high procurement costs and availability (in quantity), huge VATs make trading of local products difficult, both for restaurants and food producers, absence of certain ingredients and unjustified price.

"Always buy better industrial than worse domestic"

One of the participants explained that there are world-class brands of excellent quality that are cheaper than domestic products. In the next question, where participants had to list any local suppliers with whom they have a contract, participants mostly listed local suppliers of vegetables

– either Keka or Kolak, independent fishermen’s – no names were given, mussels, oysters, and other shellfish (Mali Ston), Škokić -meat industry, olive oil (Moretić) and over 300 Croatian wine labels.

Next question was putting the participants under the spotlight, and it raised couple of eyebrows: “How many local products are currently on your menu offer?” Participants naturally divided their menu into winter and summer menu. The average percentage of local ingredients in the winter menu of all eight restaurants was sixty-five percent, which was possible and believable due to low demand. On the other hand, the average percentage of local ingredients in the summer menu of all eight restaurants was fifty percent. That number is believed to be exaggerated by many restaurants’ owners and managers because summer demand is much higher than the availability of local products in that same period. One of the participants stated that it is unrealistic to maintain a luxury restaurant in Dubrovnik with a higher percentage of local ingredients than 35%.

The last question showed the real picture of gastronomy in Dubrovnik. At the question: “How do you personally see the future and the development of the luxury gastronomy sector in Dubrovnik?”, feelings were mixed. The first participant mentioned that if the concept of success is defined, changing the mentality with the support of the legislature, state incentives and controlling luxury gastronomy can be a growing trend. A couple of other participants had similar opinions. Luxury gastronomy could be on the rise if it receives constant financial resources. In today's world where guests are highly educated, fake things are quickly recognized and fail. Other participant mentioned optimistic view of the future of luxury gastronomy due to the return of quality mentalities, returning to traditional Croatian food and use modern techniques. One participant summarized it:

"I see a bright future".

On the other hand, there was no shortage of negative comments. One of the participants said that luxury gastronomy is a "one-time experience" that is not experienced in such a regular tone to be profitable for restaurants. Dubrovnik does not have enough guests with the purchasing power to spend on luxury restaurants for them to thrive. The advantage is given to restaurants that offer simpler food, a more relaxed atmosphere, and a story behind it all. Last participant left a rather pessimistic opinion on luxury gastronomy:

"When the old school leaves the scene, I think gastronomy in Croatia will go in the wrong direction".

4. DISCUSSION

The participants emphasized the gastronomy's major economic benefits to Dubrovnik, highlighting its role in local employment, tax income, and general economic development. On the other hand, interviewees claimed that the city's over dependence on tourism and gastronomy will jeopardize Dubrovnik's future.

The hypothesis "Dubrovnik at the moment is not a destination that offers sustainable gastronomy tourism" is validated and supported by the evidence presented in the Results. Participants mentioned initiatives to reduce waste and source locally produced food as well as attempts to integrate sustainability into gastronomy practices, but they also pointed out important obstacles and failures in Dubrovnik's pursuit of sustainable gastronomy tourism. Those obstacles included limited integration of local products, short-term profit prioritization and lack of forward thinking and planning.

It was encouraging to see that the respondents believe that luxury gastronomy is not something totally abstract, rare and expensive but rather something simple which requires extensive training and preparation. Another important finding which is also encouraging is that some of the high-end restaurants use hyper-local ingredients, and some even grow their own vegetables.

The literature has not yet fully recognized the importance of the topic and the relevance of sustainability in luxury gastronomy. The main goal of this research is to provide extra insight which could be useful for future research. The research also aims to offer possible solutions to the current problems in luxury gastronomy in Dubrovnik. The findings of the research indicate that restaurant managers and owners should give local, organic products purchasing priority and acknowledge the growing demand for sustainable culinary experiences. By putting into practice eco-friendly procedures like recycling, energy saving, and trash management, businesses may draw in more eco-aware clients.

5. LIMITATIONS & SUGGESTIONS

Croatia is a very small country and it is clear that the term *local* or *hyperlocal* cannot be applied in the same context as in other much larger countries such as France or Italy. The participants were allowed to use the term “local product” for the whole Croatia not only the city of Dubrovnik or Dubrovnik’s County. Another limitation of the study is somewhat gender biased group of participants who were almost entirely male, and it remains still to be seen if the results would have been different if female insight into this matter had been included.

Additional questions for future research could include the need to examine further and compare the usage of organic and local ingredients in the offer of high-end restaurants in Dubrovnik which aim to offer luxury gastronomy. Many would think that the terms *organic* and *local* are identical, the research shows that due to technology development and consumer-oriented society things have

changed. With the introduction of artificial fertilizers and seeds many participants have questioned the originality of local ingredients nowadays.

In the end, we are what we eat. New green practices and the education that recognizes the needs of sustainable development of tourism there is hope that luxury gastronomy can become more than just an abstract concept. The findings of the research demonstrate the increasing recognition of the value of incorporating regional, organic foods and eco-friendly procedures into luxurious dining experiences. And by including us, young people in those processes, sustainability can be integrated better in the development of luxury gastronomy in Dubrovnik.

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APPENDIX

Questions for the interview

1. Please identify your current job position and job description. What is your role in the restaurant? Could you describe your day to day activities?
2. What type of cuisine is prevalent on your current menu?
3. Would you say that your cuisine and your offer are unique? If your answer is yes, what would you say that is unique about your cuisine?
4. What do you think about today's luxury gastronomy? How would you define this concept in your words?
5. Do you think that the gastronomy sector has an impact on the environment and society? If yes, in what way?
6. Do you think that luxurious experience can go hand in hand with sustainability?
7. Do you think that your customers care about sustainability and would they be willing to pay more for it?
8. In which ways can sustainable gastronomic practices help the growth of local food producers and thus contribute to the overall economic growth?
9. What would be the biggest advantages and disadvantages of implementation of local products in your cuisine?
10. Do you currently have a contract with a local supplier inside our county? If yes, please specify the names of these producers and the products you purchase from them.
11. How many local products are currently on your menu offer?
12. How do you personally see the future and the development of the luxury gastronomy sector in Dubrovnik?

